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Predictability and Wonder: Familiarity and Recovery in Tolkien's Works

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Abstract

Explores Tolkien's technique of balancing the predictable and every-day with the wonderful by viewing things from unfamiliar perspectives. Links this to his ideas about "recovery" in "On Fairy-stories."

Additional Keywords

Predictability in J.R.R. Tolkien; Tolkien, J.R.R.—Recovery as characteristic of fairy-tale; Tolkien, J.R.R.—Sense of wonder; Tolkien, J.R.R.—Technique; Wonder in J.R.R. Tolkien; George Bolt

PREDICTABILITY AND WONDER

FAMILIARITY AND RECOVERY IN TOLKIEN'S WORKS

CHRISTINE BARKLEY

Tolkien takes his reader down a familiar path, but always there is a certain air of expectancy, for all along the way can be found the marvelous. The path, or road which "goes ever on and on / Down from the door where it began"[1] (FR, 44), is well-known to the reader: the physical laws of Middle-earth (or Niggle's Parish, or even Smith's Faery) are analogous to those of earth; the landscapes, vegetation, and animal life are similar; even the personality traits of the main characters are echoed in modern man. Yet, despite the similarities, there is always a feeling of strangeness and the possibility of meeting something unique and fascinating:

> Still round the corner we may meet
> A sudden tree or standing stone
> That none have seen but we alone. (FR, 86)

How does Tolkien get his reader simultaneously to feel at home and yet also to experience the thrill of discovering new things? He combines two seemingly incompatible concepts: predictability and wonder. Thus, though the successful outcome of a story is often predictable or even revealed beforehand, the reader nevertheless knows that in the process of achieving the end, Tolkien will find new and wonderful ways from which to view even commonplace things.

Readers of today are not far removed from hobbits; they, too, like "books filled with things that they already (know)" (FR, 17). Tolkien's predictability makes his tales recognizable as echoes of some familiar story or undeniable truth; his predictability provides the security which allows the reader to feel part of Tolkien's world. While reading Tolkien's works the reader feels like Niggle did when he discovered the real landscape that had been his picture, "Yes, the ground was becoming level, as it should, and now, of course, it was beginning to rise again" (TR, 103); each new element of Tolkien's stories is somehow familiar and expected. Tolkien uses several methods to predict the outcome of plot elements: well-known prophecies by seers, personal premonitions by the characters, hints within the narrative, and the revelation of the outcome by an omniscient narrator, and of course the expected happy ending of a fairy story.

The prophecies are nicely ambiguous, but when they come true, the result seems logical. Before the time of the War of the Ring, seers had established that the Lord of the Nazgul could not be harmed by any man and that the Paths of the Dead could only be taken by an heir of Isildur when "need (should) drive him" (RK, 54). Thus, Eowyn can hope to do what no man would dare: challenge the Ringwraith, and Aragorn and his followers, because of their need, dare to tread the dreaded path. And, though the Ringwraiths themselves and the idea of a Path of the Dead are pretty extraordinary, the use of prophecies concerning them makes them seem more normal since the people of Middle-earth accept them as real. The working out of the prophecies shows that behind the events of the War of the Ring is a master plan (if only by the artist himself), which predicts for the reader that the end will be satisfactory.

At various times, characters attempt to anticipate events. Aragorn has many personal premonitions: he warns Gandalf of possible danger beyond the doors of Moria; he suggests to Eomer that they may meet again "though all the hosts of Mordor should stand between " (RK, 52). These premonitions prove accurate. Other characters also have premonitions but they do not necessarily have the same foresight as Aragorn. Theoden hints at his own death in battle when he tells Hirgon, Denethor's messenger, that the King of the Mark will ride to Gondor himself "though maybe he will not ride back" (RK, 73). This prediction does come true, but it is too much like Treebeard's fear that the Ents' march may be their last or Denethor's conviction that the West will fall, which do not come true, to be a legitimate prophecy. We as readers fear these premonitions will prove accurate, so we are pleasantly surprised when they don't. Gandalf, also has a premonition, the most important one in the trilogy, that Gollum "has some part to play yet, for good or ill, before the end" (FR, 69).

The role that Gollum plays at the end of the Quest is elaborately prepared for by various hints within the narrative. Gandalf's first hint (mentioned a moment ago) comes in Chap. 2 of the first book. Chapter 2 of the second book

[1] All references to LotR, 2nd ed. Houghton Mifflin Co. 1967.

establishes the fact that Gollum is free and has been searching for Baggins. From the time that the Fellowship enters Moria, Gollum is never far away. Early in the fourth book, Frodo suggests that as the Master of the Precious, he could command Gollum "to leap from a precipice or to cast (himself) into the fire" (TT, 248). Finally, a few pages before the climax, Gollum is told "Begone and trouble me no more! If you touch me ever again, you shall be cast yourself into the Fire of Doom" (RK, 221). Gollum's fortuitous fall into Orodruin seems familiar because it has been so carefully predicted.

Of course, there are also just enough false hints in the narrative to keep a reader from becoming too confident about predicting events. Sometimes the sound of hoofbeats on the road is cause by a friend, Merry or Glorfindel, rather than a Black Rider. A premature sentence of doom may look like a prediction of defeat yet not be one: when Frodo leaves Lorien, the narrator informs the reader, "never did Frodo see that fair land again" (FR, 394). Frodo's loss of Bilbo seems permanent when the narrator proclaims "he (Bilbo) was never seen by any hobbit in Hobbiton again" (FR, 40). But, as the plot eventually shows, these last two statements can be true and yet not be a prediction of death for the characters.

Only one event in the Lord of the Rings does not seem to be adequately predicted and therefore appears contrived to many readers: the return of Gandalf. After Aragorn's cryptic words about danger in Moria, the reader isn't too surprised at Gandalf's fall. And, the description of Gandalf upon his return too clearly suggests that the character is actually Saruman. So, for many readers Gandalf's return and subsequent explanation are suspect. However, Gandalf's disappearances and reappearances have been numerous in the past; beginning with the Troll incident in the Hobbit, Gandalf vanishes and then reappears again when least expected four times before his fall in Moria. Each reappearance is totally unexpected and unpredicted by textual clues. Therefore, though the lack of textual preparation may momentarily fool the reader, Gandalf's reappearance in Two Towers is true to established form. One could almost say that the reader is conditioned to expect Gandalf to show up when he is least expected.

The final and ultimate textual predictability involves the all-knowing narrator who reveals elements of the story ahead of time, often before it even begins, especially in The Silmarillion. Before the Beren and Luthien chapter, for example, the narrator has already announced that Beren returned from the dead and that he won the love and the hand of Luthien. The author of the Prologue of the LOTR states that it was Frodo who wrote the account of the War of the Ring which appears in the Red Book of Westmarch. From this information and from the references to Sam's descendants and Meriadoc and Peregrin as heads of great families, the narrator reveals that all four hobbits returned to the Shire.

Of course, the strongest sense of predictability associated with any of Tolkien's stories is based upon reader expectation. Because his works are fairy stories, readers assume Tolkien will provide the eucatastrophe, the happy ending. Even the characters themselves discuss the fact that they are part of a story. On the stair to Cirith Ungol, Sam and Frodo talk about the fact that they are in a story that may one day be told or sung before a fireside. Any mention of story telling reminds the reader of his expectations about the satisfactory endings to such tales.

Tolkien's strong predictability naturally creates an important question: why don't readers get bored and put down his books? Part of the answer is that Tolkien makes his readers curious about how the predictions will come true. But even in the creation of suspense other authors can excel as well. Tolkien's special genius is that interwoven with the plot elements is a sense of wonder, of fascination concerning the creatures and the beauty of the world. Tolkien lets his readers satisfy what he calls "certain primordial human desires. One of these desires is to survey the depths of space and time. Another is . . . to hold communion with other living things." (TR, 13) Between predictable events is revealed a fresh preception of reality which opens a reader's eyes to the wonder of life.

Tolkien's special brand of wonder or as he calls it, recovery is showing familiar objects or creatures as if they were new and strange. He offers his reader a new view of nature. He also capitalizes on conventional concepts of wonder and fascination, most especially man's reverence for life. Tolkien shows that life exists many more places than just within the breast of man; he even goes to extremes to suggest that stones can hear or remember, that the earth itself can feel pain at being trampled upon, or that metal or glass can compel men to pay attention to them. Tolkien is adhering to reader expectation that all things in the realm of Faerie are marvelous and combining this belief with his own conception that

> Faerie contains many things besides elves and fays, besides dwarfs, witches, trolls, giants, or dragons: it holds the seas, the sun, the moon, the sky; and the earth, and all things that are in it: tree and bird, water and stone, wine and bread, and ourselves, mortal men, when we are enchanted. (TR, 9)

In fact, Tolkien would rather emphasize the wonder that can be found in commonplace objects than that found in creatures of his imagination.

In Lord of the Rings, the most intense moment of wonder any character experiences occurs when Frodo first views Lorien. "He saw no colour but those he knew, gold and white and blue and green, but they were fresh and poignant, as if he had at that moment first perceived them and made for them names new and wonderful" (FR, 365). No tree has ever seemed so fantastic as the one Frodo touched;

> never before had he been so suddenly and so keenly aware of the feel and texture of a tree's skin and of the life within it. He felt a delight in wood and in the touch of it, neither as forester nor as carpenter; it was a delight of the living tree itself. (FR 366)

A similar catch-of-the-breath is experienced by other characters, but usually it is because of some natural beauty: a sunset viewed through a waterfall, an elephant, the dawning of a new day. The first level of wonder found in Tolkien's works, those things which the characters marvel at, mostly consists of natural or common sights.

The second level of wonder involves unusual or magic objects or happenings which the characters within the story find realistic but which to the reader are fantastic. The wonders of Tolkien's imagination, all the fabulous devices or powers of the Elves, of Wizards, and even of men, are treated non-chalantly, as if they were the commonplace. To draw too much attention to a green sun, after all, would only make a reader aware that it is unusual, to make him remember that real suns are yellow (or perhaps orange or red), and would thus break the spell of Secondary Belief. So Tolkien merely mentions but does not dwell on the Elves' ability to mindspeak (S, 98; FR, 372; RK, 263), Gandalf's knowledge of Frodo's memory (FR, 232), Gandalf's instant replay ability by which he knew what happened on the fields of the Pelennor (RK, 132), the telepathic powers of the palatiri, the magic of Galadriel's mirror or of Gandalf's power over fire, the power of song, the enslaving power of the Ring, the disintegration of knives and swords, the monsters: fiery balrogs and scaley trolls. Similarly, because the characters do not think it is odd, the reader accepts sentient trees (Old Man Willow), animals who can understand speech (Shadowfax, Roac, Bill), walking or talking trees (Huorns, Ents), talking animals (Huan, the eagles, the dragons), and even a talking sword (Beleg's Anglachel). These wonders are not dwelt upon by Tolkien but they add to the overall wonder felt by the reader.

Also on the second, or more subconscious, level of wonder Tolkien introduces new ways to view time and space. In the realm of Faerie, represented by the dwelling places of the Elves, by Niggle's Parish, and by Smith's Faery, it is possible "to survey the depths of space and time." The wonder of the four dimensions is made clear when one can view them differently, see them from a new perspective. A

manipulation of time is not unusual in modern literature. But Tolkien goes one step further than most writers; he plays the same game with space, more effectively exhibiting the three dimensions as strange and fascinating.

The wonder of three-dimensional space is made clear when distance is seen from a new perspective. Tolkien shows the 1) flexibility of distance (how things up close can seem far away and vice versa), 2) the ability of the mind to distinguish selected detail despite the distance between the viewer and the object, and 3) the character's ability to accept two different views of the same space simultaneously; he is able to do this without losing his reader's belief in the reality of his landscapes.

In the realm of Faery, Smith noticed, "the air is so lucid that eyes can see the red tongues of birds as they sing on the trees upon the far side of the valley, though that is very wide and the birds are no greater than wrens" (Sm, 31). Once when Smith returned home from Faery, he brought a flower given him by the Queen. When it lay in his wife's hand, it "seemed like a thing seen from a great distance" (Sm. 34). Later when Smith took his star off his forehead, "though the star shone brightly again as it lay in his hand, he could not see it, except as a blurred dazzle of light that seemed far away" (Sm, 46). The flexibility of space suggests that perception is a psychological as well as a physical phenomenon and that recovery or wonder is often just a function of a changed perception.

Especially amazing is the mind's ability to focus on specific detail, despite the distance between the eye and the object. Niggle has an advantage when he views his picture which has turned into a landscape because he can remember the detail from his days of painting it as well as perceive that detail in the midst of the larger picture. As he rides over a hill, he notices "it was green and close; and yet he could see every blade distinctly" (TR, 103).

But Tolkien's most fantastic feat in his exploration of the possibilities of space is his ability to portray two views of distance simultaneously, each equally distinctly. When Pippin looks into the palantir, he sees "tiny stars. It seemed very far away and long ago, yet hard and clear" (TT, 198). And, even as Niggle walks through the forest, which was in the background of his painting, he can see it as a whole forest:

> As he walked away (from the Tree), he discovered an odd thing: the Forest, of course, was a distant Forest, yet he could approach it, even enter it, without its losing that particular charm. He had never before been able to walk into the distance without turning it into mere surroundings. (TR, 104-5)

Smith is even able to be in several places at once. When the Queen of Faery laid her hand on his brow, "he seemed to be both in the world and in Faery, and also outside them and surveying them" (Sm, 38).

Tolkien manipulates space possibly in order to better understand it or to gain some measure of control over it, or more likely, merely to show the wonder of the phenomenon of space. He does the same with time, more effectively exhibiting the fourth dimension as strange and fascinating.

Tolkien's unique ability is that, while keeping a chronological framework, he can show the 1) flexibility of time (to slow down or speed up or even to stop), 2) the power of memory to control time, 3) two different times simultaneously, and 4) the compacting of time.

The flexibility of time is best viewed by comparing how time is seen by various characters. The Elves, because of their immortality, have lived through many ages of history. The all-prevailing sense of history in Tolkien's Middle-earth shows the interconnection between past and present; Sam even mentions to Frodo that they are still part of the tale of Beren which began two ages previously. Past events are more clearly connected to the present because they are not just a matter of record, preserved through song or through history books, but because they are preserved in the memory of living Elves who actually experienced those events. Legolas best explains the way Elves view time:

> For the Elves the world moves, and it moves both very swift and very slow. Swift, because they themselves change little, and all else fleets by: it is a grief to them. Slow, because they do not count the running years, not for themselves. The passing seasons are but ripples ever repeated in the long long stream. (FR, 404-5)

Gandalf experiences ultimate flexibility of time when he "strayed out of thought and time" (TT, 106); time was halted for him for awhile. For men (and hobbits) time could be viewed as the running of sand through an hour glass; for them time can come to an end. But even they can experience the timelessness of the Elves. Bilbo mentions the timelessness of Rivendell, "time doesn't seem to pass here; it just is" (FR, 243). Sam feels the same way about Lorien: "Anyone would think that time did not count in there!" (FR, 404).

The mind's ability to focus on a particular time is like its ability to selectively choose detail. Through their own memories, through song, or through the memory of the Elves or of the earth itself, characters can control time. Aragorn relives his meeting with Arwen on Cerin Amroth, when he again visits Lorien with the Fellowship. Frodo, also,

> felt that he was in a timeless land that did not fade or change or fall into forgetfulness. When he had gone and passed again into the outer world, still Frodo the wanderer from the Shire would walk there, upon the grass among elanor and niphredil in fair Lothlorien. (FR, 365-66)

Tolkien is also able to portray two views of time simultaneously. Elrond and Arwen are described as young and yet not so (FR, 239). Frodo expresses his belief that in Lorien they "were in a time that has elsewhere long gone by" (FR, 404). When Frodo last views Galadriel as he leaves Lorien, the narrator says, "already she seem to him, as by men of later days Elves still at times are seen: present and yet remote, a living vision of that which has already been left far behind by the flowing streams of time" (FR, 389).

But the most unusual and fascinating view of time is seen through the Ents. Mutability and change are results of the passage of time; yet the Ents see things as being the sum of their changes, thus effectively compacting time. To the Ents, the names of things are stories about them. Even Entish eyes are a mixture of the past, "an enourmous well... filled up with ages of memory" (TT, 66) and the present. As we view one space as a whole, Ents considers all four dimensions at once, not the three dimensions in increments of time.

Viewing anything in a new way, from a different angle, provides the recovery which Tolkien says is a function of fairy stories; the heightened wonder one then feels makes a familiar thing more precious. Tolkien does this with commonplace objects, especially his beloved trees, but also with water, grass, stones, or the sun. But he also provides a new fascination for life itself, through his many talking, thinking, and feeling creatures. The wonderful power of the imagination is exhibited by Tolkien's fantastic beings and events. More than anything else, though, he shows the wonder of time and space, the importance of the four dimensions to our perceptions of our world, by displaying the dimensions in new or strange ways.

But too much wonder, too many new things or too many strange views of familiar things, would bore a reader as easily as too much sameness. Similarly, too many ways in which the Secondary World corresponds to the Primary World would make the work nothing but allegory. A union is needed between familiarity and the "recovery of the freshness of vision" (TR, 59). Tolkien combines just enough predictability in plot elements with wonder at the marvelous objects, beings, and situations found along the way to create a perfect balance.